

Slaves in Paris: Hidden Lives and Fugitive Histories. Miranda Spieler. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2025. 256 pp. \$39.95. Hardcover. ISBN-13: 9780674986541.

While the horrors of enslavement in the French Caribbean are well known, metropolitan France—and especially Paris—has often appeared to historians as a place of relative freedom for people of color. Indeed, in the eighteenth century, the Paris Admiralty Court repeatedly ruled that enslaved individuals became free on French soil. But in her innovative and compelling *Slaves in Paris*, Miranda Spieler reveals the limits of this rosy vision. She shows that while petitioners did indeed win freedom in the courts, enslavers in Paris could request extrajudicial warrants (*lettres de cachet*) from the king to capture, arrest, and re-enslave men and women who had sought their freedom.

Slaves in Paris is based on impressive research. Initially inspired by the discovery of urban slave hunts in the police files in the *Archives de la Bastille*, Spieler roots her study in Paris, but also consulted documents in public and private archives across France and in the Ile de la Réunion and Mauritius. Each of the book's five chapters centers on an individual who sought freedom. This biographical approach is both engaging and challenging, as our information about each of these people is limited, coming largely from those who sought to control them. Spieler chooses not to speculate on what they might have been thinking or feeling. Instead, she argues by contiguity, trying to follow their life stories by exploring the places, institutions, and people around them. In so doing, she also uncovers the capital's growing ties to slavery and colonial empire.

The chapters follow a roughly chronological approach. Chapter one introduces us to a young man known by several names, but most often as “Jean.” Jean escaped slavery in Paris twice in the early 1750s, only to be recaptured. Spieler notes that starting in midcentury, sugar moguls began to move from French port cities to the capital. Enslavers, often backed by the navy, increasingly used *lettres de cachet* as mechanisms for controlling enslaved people in metropolitan France, where colonial law did not apply. Jean became one of the first victims of this system. He sought liberty through enlisting in the military; Spieler briefly explores the case of the Saxe Volunteers (a regiment in France with a number of Black soldiers) to understand why this seemed like a viable option, as well as why it failed.

In chapter two, Spieler turns to the effects of the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), which brought growing numbers of displaced French colonists and enslaved people to Paris. While the courts declared that people of color were free in France and even granted them retroactive salaries after the establishment of peace, the navy issued *lettres de cachet* to keep them enslaved, targeting at least nine servants who had been declared legally free or whose cases were pending. Spieler anchors her narrative on Pauline, an enslaved tradeswoman from the Mascarene Islands who had banked money with her master. After they arrived in Paris, he refused to provide her with her savings or freedom. Instead, he attempted to use a *lettre de cachet* to have her arrested and sent back to the Ile de Bourbon; she escaped and spent six months underground, while petitioning for her freedom.

Aspects of Pauline's story resonated with those of her contemporaries, but it was also unusual. She seems to have been the only enslaved person in the police files from the 1760s who successfully eluded a manhunt. Spieler emphasizes the assistance Pauline received from both Black domestics and from nobles whose fortunes depended on slavery, but who saw this case as a threat to norms of colonial commerce. Legally freed, Pauline ultimately went to Mauritius as a stowaway, seemingly disappearing there into a world of free women with no last names.

André Lucidor's life forms the core of chapter three. He arrived in France as an enslaved orphan in the 1720s, eventually becoming a dueling master, marrying a white French woman with whom he had two daughters, and owning a three-story house in the outskirts of the city. After becoming *de facto* free as a teenager, he officially received his freedom papers in 1750. But Spieler argues that this is not a simple triumphalist narrative. Instead, Lucidor "spent the whole of his adult life as urban fugitive" (77), not just avoiding police, but also circumventing other requirements, like those that dueling masters be members of guilds. He did so in part by living and working in liminal spaces in the city.

Lucidor's experiences also reveal hardening racial attitudes and tightening bonds between metropolitan France and the colonies. The young man encountered relative leniency when he was arrested as a teenager in Paris for sodomy in 1733; while his prison conditions were harsh, he was not deported, despite the wishes of his former enslaver. Spieler uncovers similar cases from the 1750s where those arrested met grimmer fates. Lucidor and his family also faced growing hostility and threats of violence; they were severely indebted when he died in 1771.

Chapter four opens by describing how "Julien Mestif," a twenty-two-year-old man from Martinique, was clubbed over the head and seized when he was walking on Pont-Neuf in 1787, despite his belief that he was legally protected. "Mestif" was not Julien's last name, but a designation of his particular mixed-race status. Julien's rights depended on whether he was understood to be effectively white, a debate that played out not only in legal forums, but also in newspapers. Julien's cause célèbre intersected with a series of explicitly racist measures from the later 1770s limiting the presence and rights of Black and mixed-race people in the metropole. The Parlement of Paris ultimately defined Julien as non-white and declared him to be a slave of Reine Baudelle, his aunt.

Julien's story, however, did not end there. Spieler follows him and those around him into the French Revolution to understand why, after the general abolition of slavery in the French empire in February 1794, in July of that same year, the Parlement of Paris specifically revoked its decision declaring Julien a slave. Julien hoped to travel in places that did not recognize French abolition; he needed proof of his personal liberty. Even at the height of the Revolutionary emancipation, freedom was fragile.

The final chapter centers on a figure whose name is probably most recognizable to readers: Ourika. The fictional Ourika was the protagonist of Claire de Duras's well-known 1823 novel, a Black woman taken from Senegal as a child and raised by an aristocratic family; Ourika realizes that her race will keep her from marrying and ends up dying in a convent. The real Ourika was kidnapped or orphaned as a child during a slave raid; she became the property of the governor of

Senegal. He “gifted” her in 1787 to Marechal de Beauvau, who would become a founding member of Society of the Amis des Noirs. Spieler here considers what child-gifting meant and why the governor thought it appropriate to gift an enslaved girl. The real Ourika died while still a child in 1799. Duras, however, had her fictional character live into adulthood and thus to a key moment in the history of slavery. The young woman’s cloistering and death in 1802 corresponded to both the return of the Carmelite nuns in France and Napoleon’s restoration of slavery in the French empire (with the notable exception of Haiti), the period when the French government officially repudiated revolutionary emancipation. Spieler also uncovers Duras’s own close family connections and wealth derived from slavery and colonialism.

Spieler has done a remarkable job of combining scraps of information into powerful accounts and of presenting individuals whose stories are not just illuminating of contemporary developments but also gripping in their own right. The book is often dense, but well written. The fragmentary nature of the evidence, however, does inherently leave questions. While Spieler presents us with two women and three male protagonists as subjects of her chapters, she does not reflect systematically on how the opportunities—or challenges—for exiting slavery in Paris compared for women and men. Apart from touching on the experiences of Julien and those around him, *Slaves in Paris* does not engage with the upheavals of the revolutionary epoch. It is a logical decision, as doing justice to that era could easily be the subject of another book. Yet there are intriguing loose ends that Spieler chooses not to address here. For example, Lucidor’s daughter, Marie-Thérèse, later *la citoyenne* Corbin, was prominent in the Parisian festival celebrating the 1794 abolition of slavery and gave a discourse on emancipation; one wonders how her father and her family’s experiences may have affected her.

Overall, this is an original and important book, which reshapes our understanding of law, race, and freedom in eighteenth-century France. If these stories sometimes leave us wanting more, they also leave us rooting for these individuals to become invisible to the eyes of those hunting them down.

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